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ABSTRACT

When designing a contemporary curriculum in communication, it is important to adapt the specific set of skills and knowledge to the needs of the marketplace. The change in the transformation from speech to communication to communication/information technology is reflected in the various names of university departments. Schools that have changed curricula have courses not existing before--such as development communication, communication policy and planning, communication networks, and telecommunication--which answer a demand for the transformation of old knowledge to new contexts and the generation of new knowledge and new skills. A design for a contemporary curriculum in communication should have the following: (1) a recognition of the necessity for some closure in the argument of the two worlds of humanism and social science, and the realization that communication is the stronger for the existence of both; (2) a willingness to retool for the teachers as well as the students; and (3) a respect for the marketplace as being as legitimate an end for the students as being "educated" and that the best compromise is no compromise but a curriculum that gives both. With these premises, a curriculum can be prepared with an orderly sequencing of courses to create a climate for growth and with course content that indicates academic as well as occupational opportunities. Those institutions that have made the shift in their curricula without losing in the transformation will experience increasing student enrollments, a need to increase and update faculty, and a continuing demand for their students. (EL)

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DESIGN FOR A CONTEMPORARY CURRICULUM IN COMMUNICATION

by

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It is said that only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun, but I felt as though I had stayed in it too long when I returned to the U.S. Mainland to the Northeast to teach after a lengthy stay in the Hawaiian sun. There was the sense of hallucinating, of deja vu, to find myself in the midst of curricula, arrested in time, exactly like or near enough like, the ones I had left in the late 1950's. It was downright scarey. When faced with culture shock, you can take one or more of several routes to bring your world back in balance. My route was not flight or avoidance, but to face the issue head-on and see what sense I could make out of the situation. The result was this paper--the design for a contemporary curriculum in communication.

It was obvious that I was not alone in my concerns as exemplified in the controversy surrounding the proposed change in the name of the Speech Communication Association. It was obvious also that one of the causes of the controversy stemmed from the limiting perimeters of working only from oral tradition as that from which all courses, research, and scholarship grow. Of course it was and is more than the use of the word "speech," but the arguments surrounding the issue often centered on that use. In our examination of the issues, let us take a look at the evolution of the field of communication.

Our field, if looked at from one perspective, has at least a 2,400 year old tradition of rhetorical studies of a practical sort but essentially humanistic in origin. The focus was on oral discourse and the area of study became known as speech. There was and is the belief that there is a core set of knowledge that is persistent and unchangeable. Aristotle is as real today as he was in his day. Departments with a "speech" emphasis were built

around the core skills for a democratic society--public speaking, discussion, and debate--and the core tools for exercising these skills--rhetoric and rhetorical criticism. Persons educated in the speech tradition believe that they have received the core knowledge for their discipline in the universities they attended and they teach it, in many cases, exactly as they have been taught. If it is universal, it is as good today as it was for the Greeks. The consensus appears to be that the truth exists in what was written in the prescriptions advocated as long as 2,400 years ago and is there to be discovered.

As Wilbur Schramm once described communication, it was an oasis or a watering hole at which scholars from different disciplines would come to refresh themselves. Finding the area fertile and friendly, they would stay a while but then move on. They brought with them a different perspective and a different, or lack of respect for, tradition. Their perspective was that knowledge changes as new information arises and the core set of knowledge was not persistent and unchangeable but subject to research and change. Not all of these social scientists moved on. Many, particularly during the second World War, stayed on to become "communicologists." They believed that communication was the generic term for the core process of the discipline with speech signifying but one medium in that process. Their core areas of operation are regularities in contexts such as interpersonal, organizational, and mass communication, and their core tools for investigation are theory and social scientific research methodologies. The consensus appears to be that the search for truth in human behavior is to be found in the social and behavioral regularities which change in observable ways.

The latter half of the twentieth century has witnessed another revolution in communication which has restructured the character of society and its

educational institutions. This communications revolution has introduced into the academic arena a marketplace of the practical and technological world with the premise that that which is most valuable is that which can be applied. The emphasis is on the adaptation of a specific set of skills and knowledge to specific areas. It is not the importance of the skills or knowledge in and of themselves but the adaptation of them to the marketplace that is important. Knowledge is therefore perceived as functional and the division of that knowledge is defined by occupation. Truth is that which works in application.

The seeds of this transformation from speech, to communication, to communication/information/technology, have been present always. Our field has a tradition of being practical but has moved so rapidly forward and transformed itself so radically that it has taken the breath away of persons inclined to want more time to think things through.

Some schools have moved more rapidly than others. Some schools have not seen the need to move at all. Paradigms for each of the steps in the evolutionary process of our field can be found in university Departments or Schools which exist today.

SPEECH	COMMUNICATION	COMMUNICATION/INFORMATION
Temple	Michigan State	Annenberg East
Penn State	Wisconsin	Annenberg West
Minnesota (mixed)	Illinois	Stanford

There are few pure or ideal states of each, but these schools do exemplify the stages in the process of change.

What has this done in terms of curricula? For one thing, we find changes in the ways in which courses are approached. For example, let us examine some of these.

SPEECH	COMMUNICATION	COMMUNICATION/INFORMATION
media criticsm	media effects	media production
argumentation	negotiation	conflict resolution
persuasion	social influence/ public opinion	advertising
public speaking	interpersonal	management

And courses which did not exist before in any discipline in any coherent fashion are finding their way into communication departments across the country--communication policy and planning, communication networks, development communication, telecommunication, high-technology management. These are not fads or whimsy anymore than the study of communication is. These are courses which answer a demand for the transformation of old knowledge to new contexts and the generation of new knowledge and new skills. The problem is that if we do not change, someone else will fill the gap. Already in areas where departments have refused to change, Schools of Business and Medicine are adding new areas of communication study and Departments such as Political Science and Journalism are moving forward with courses such as conflict resolution and advertising.

I understand that many in the field say, "let them go" and why should we defend our turf? We are not defending our turf so much as we are changing as society changes around us. Even those of us who still worship Aristotle as the truth would have to admit that he would be in the forefront of the innovation of the communication curriculum with the skills for preparing our students for life in a democratic society. In no way am I advocating nor do I believe that within the recommendations for change to a curriculum for contemporary society do we lose that which has gone before in our field. No, we are the richer for our heritage. And I do understand the threat to many that the new courses demand learning new information and new skills.

I have heard again and again, "I cannot teach that which I have not been taught." Reconsider. If that were the case, nothing new would ever be taught in our universities. If we do not constantly grow in our professions, and in our knowledge, we are shortchanging not only our students but ourselves.

A design for a contemporary curriculum in communication cannot be achieved without (1) a recognition of the necessity for some closure in the argument of the two worlds of humanism and social science and the realization that communication is the stronger for the existence of both; (2) a willingness to retool not only for the students but for ourselves; and (3) a respect for the marketplace as being as legitimate an end for our students as being "educated" and that the best compromise is no compromise but a curriculum which gives both. With these premises, we can prepare a curriculum with an orderly sequencing of courses to create a climate for growth, with course content which indicates academic as well as occupational opportunities, with some vision of the society in which we and our students live which indicates not only where it is but where it is going.

The world and education itself has gone through these transformations of producing the liberally educated, the scientific, the technically competent human being. Those institutions which have made the shift in their curricula without losing in the transformation will experience increasing student enrollments, a need to increase and update faculty, and a continuing demand for their students. Those institutions which linger in these transformations will experience a decline in student enrollments (first at the graduate level), a need to replace faculty only in kind and training, a diminishing demand for their students, and diminishing support from their administrations.

This is not a rejection of the liberally educated person or of speech communication nor is it a rejection of scientific training or communication education. It is a call to retain the best in each and to apply it to a new context--the work of the world. It is that demand which motivated Aristotle to talk about political, legal, and epideictic oral speech. It was that demand which led Schramm, Berlo, and Rogers to apply communication theory to interpersonal, organizational, and mass media environments. It is that demand which now directs our attention to policy and planning, management in high-technology, and communication technology.

It is Spring in New England. The sun is out (at least most of the time) but it is a gentle sun. Flowers are blooming and renewal is everywhere. Perhaps I was too hasty, as is apt to happen, in the first throes of culture shock for I have found change occurring in the very curricula which I first encountered. It is, in many cases, a slow assessment but an assessment all the same which has started to take place in a number of departments. And like all renewal, it is beautiful to behold. This is a sun I do not fear.

REFERENCES

The bibliography for such a paper could be endless but for the sake of brevity let me refer only to a number of unpublished sources which I consulted before starting to write. This paper has benefited greatly from the many discussions which Don Cushman and I have had about developing new courses, new programs, and new degrees in Communication. In addition I consulted the following unpublished documents--

A Summary of the Principal Arguments Concerning the Proposed Name Change of the Speech Communication Association, Spring 1985.

A Letter of Intent to Propose a Doctoral Program in the Department of Rhetoric and Communication, College of Humanities and Fine Arts, SUNY-Albany, November 1980.

Proposal for a Study Leading to the Doctor of Philosophy in Communication and Information Sciences, University of Hawaii-Manoa, February 1982.

and the following unpublished articles which are part of a larger manuscript now under review--

Becker, Samuel L. "The Rhetorical Tradition"

Schramm, Wilbur. "Human Communication as a Field of Behavioral Science"

Trodahl, V.C. "The Social Scientific Roots of the Mass Communication Tradition"